

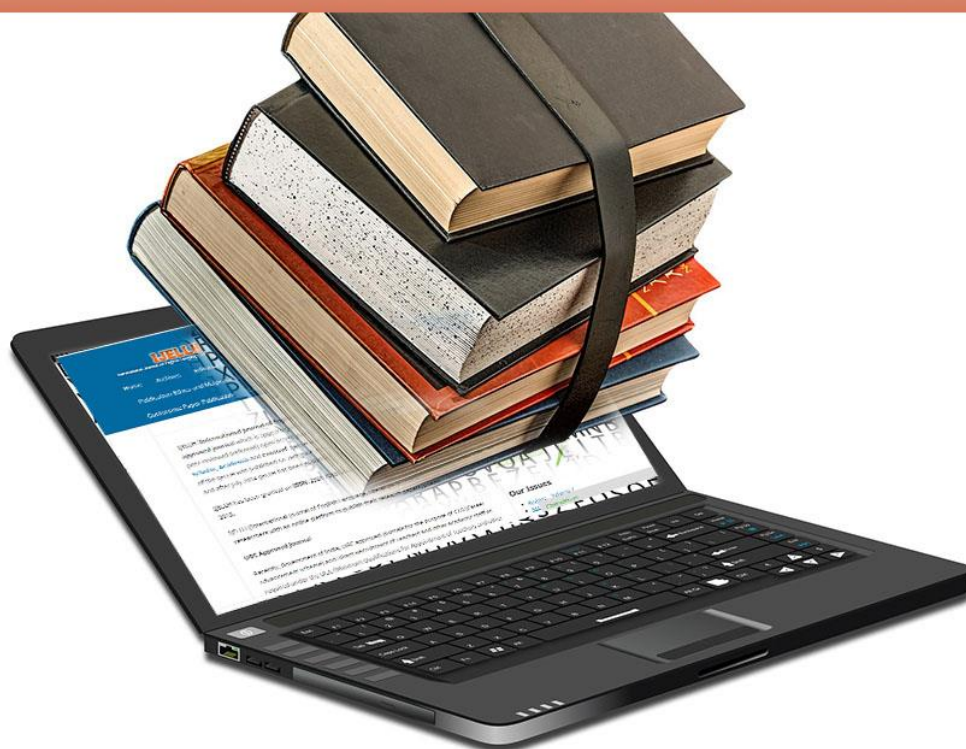
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Nomads of the Twenty-first Century: Displacement and Repatriation in *Temporary People*

Abstract

The term Diaspora has presumed different dimensions with the emergence of postcolonial literatures. Writers like Salman Rushdie, V.S. Naipaul and Jhumpa Lahiri enrich the genre by including thoughts and experiences of the displaced and marginalized in their writings. Immigrant writings problematize the concepts home, homeland, identity and belongingness in transnational and national lands. Problems of migrants, from the third to the first world and from one state to another within a nation, were expanded to a global perspective with immigrant writings. Such works concentrate on the position of a subject in an alien culture, loss of identity and isolation witnessed by communities who are displaced from their homelands either by choice or by force. Deepak Unnikrishnan's debut novel *Temporary People*, published in 2017, winner of the Restless Books Prize for new immigrant writing, narrates the fragmented lives of the guest workers of the United Arab Emirates who oscillate between two lands on either side of the Arabian Sea. Joining the row of Benjamin's *Goat Days*, a novel about the enslavement in Saudi Arabia, *Temporary People* explores the experience of immigration, identity and exile in the Gulf and India from a South Asian perspective. Deepak Unnikrishnan portrays the cruel realities around the borders and the

homelessness of living in a foreign land. This paper aims to analyze *Temporary People* as a novel belongs to the genre of Diaspora literature and its portrayal of displacement and repatriation.

Key words: Diaspora, immigrant writing, Migration, identity, displacement, exile.

Oxford Dictionary of Critical Theory defines the term Diaspora as “population migration and dispersal (voluntary and involuntary) ...is generally thought in terms of ‘homelessness’ a sense of trauma and exile, but lately it has come to be viewed more positively as a kind of post-national cosmopolitanism or Creoleness in which the diasporic subject represents a new, more advanced stage of politically and culturally heterogeneous citizenry.” (Buchanan, 137). Writers like Salman Rushdie, V.S.Naipaul and JhumpaLahiri enrich diasporic literature by including thoughts and experiences of the displaced and marginalized in their writings. Immigrant writings problematize concepts like home, homeland, identity, belongingness in transnational and national lands. Problems of migrants, from the third to the first world and from one state to another within a nation, were expanded to a global perspective with immigrant writings. From the above definition, two approaches towards the term diaspora are possible: one is the traditional perspective according to which diaspora as produced by the forced movement of people that leads to displacement and resettlement at a large level outside the homeland. The second one, which is postmodern in nature sees it as expressing hybrid culture and identity.

Deepak Unnikrishnan’s debut novel *Temporary People*, published in 2017, winner of the Restless Books Prize for new immigrant writing, narrates the fragmented lives of the guest workers of the United Arab Emirates who oscillate between two lands on either side of the Arabian Sea. Joining the row of Benyamin’s *Goat Days*, a novel about the enslavement in Saudi Arabia, *Temporary People* explores the experience of immigration, identity and exile in the Gulf and India from a South Asian perspective. Deepak Unnikrishnan portrays the

cruel realities around the borders and the hopelessness of living in a foreign land. This paper aims to analyze *Temporary People* as a novel belongs to the genre of Diaspora literature and its portrayal of displacement and repatriation.

While considering the evolution of Indian Diaspora, one can classify it into three categories. The labor force movement during the colonial period in search of livelihood in distant lands can be considered as the first instance. The reason behind this migration was, of course, the poor economic condition in India which leads to extreme poverty and unemployment. In addition to this, Europeans took the skilled, hardworking Indian labor force to their plantations. During 1970s people moved into neighboring countries as professionals, artisans, traders, and factory workers in search of opportunities- this is the second wave of migration. The third wave consisting of the movement of the educated elite of India seeking a better life in the developed countries. During this third period, with the emergence of a number of theories in literature and thought, the term diaspora acquired general connotations.

Diasporic sensibility is not something new in literature. Migrants and expatriates from the writers' community had recorded their experiences of loss and displacement earlier. Diasporic literature is an umbrella term it includes different works of literature written by authors outside their homeland. A sense of loss and alienation works as core to all diasporic writings. This genre reflects alienation, displacement, identity crisis, nostalgia, and existential rootlessness. Though the feeling of 'Indianness' connects writers of the genres each other, each one of them carries a different sense of tradition, different political amalgamations, and different regional and national memories. Diasporic narratives are not merely about scattering or dispersion, they are experiences shaped by the socio-political conditions of the countries of origin and of adoption. About the diasporic condition of separateness, Salman Rushdie describes in *The Imaginary Homelands* as, "To be an Indian writer in this society is to face,

every day, problems of definition. What does it mean to be ‘Indian’ outside India? How can culture be preserved without becoming ossified? How should we discuss the need for change within ourselves and our community without seeming to play into the hands of our racial enemies?” (Rushdie,17). Whatever the reasons for migration, the immigrants share certain common feelings based on the socio-political conditions of the adopted land. Rushdie’s concept of ‘Imaginary homelands’ acquired extended meanings in the twenty-first century diasporic studies. Not only the homelands are imaginary as mentioned by him, but even the land of adoption /settlement is also becoming imaginary. This Imaginary land concept is very much associated with ‘American Dream’, which is another celebrated term in the discourse of globalization.

Diasporic writings unfold the experiences of the migrants in terms of location, culture, and identity. Early Indian diasporic writers like Raja Rao, G.V.Desani and Nirad C Chaudhary look back India from outside as expatriates and recorded their thoughts. Later this old diasporic community was replaced by a new group of Indian writers who live in the age of technology in which traditional meanings of distance and friendship withered. Two categories of writers are there in this second wave. One group includes those writers who spent a part of their life in India and were displaced to foreign countries later. The second category of writers is those who were born and brought up outside India. Deepak Unnikrishnan belongs to this second category. His debut novel ‘Temporary People’ addresses plights of Malayali guest workers in UAE, from the perspective of Kerala gulf diasporic narrative. This novel explains the lives of working classes who spend decades in building gulf. Through his experiments in language, Deepak portrays the psychic landscapes of the people. He defines Pravasi as “foreigner, outsider. immigrant, worker. Pravasi means you’ve left your native place. Pravasi means you will have regrets. You’ll want money, then more money... and by the time you have done the math in your head, everything you’ve missed,

what's been gained, you'll come to realize what the word *Pravasi* really means: absence. That is what it means absence" (186).

This 'absence' is central to the diasporic literature of all kinds. The cultural displacement which resulted in the feeling of absence creates alienation. As individuals alienated from both native land and the host country, the feeling of regaining lost home culminates in the feeling of 'in-between' and a yearning for home, as Homi K Bhabha describes a "mythic place of desire in diasporic imagination" (Bhabha, 77). Deepak Unnikrishnan describes this situation by expanding the title of a chapter as '*Ivadey* (Here). *Avaday*(There)'. It is arranged as a telephonic conversation between a mother and a son. The diasporic feeling of homelessness is not in its materialistic sense. The cultural backups are the backbone of native life; one can't carry such practices to a foreign land. In a chapter titled 'Veed' writer says "The English equivalent of "veed" is home or place. In Malayalam, my parents' tongue, "veed" encompasses a family soul, where ancestors are cremated, where the soil remembers your footprint, but in translation, as "veed" becomes "home", the word's power has ebbed.

In the case of most expatriates, a wish to return home in order to get back all lost things and feelings will be there. This is part of the conflict between memory and desire, both play a significant role in migrant life. Memories of people, place and immemorial times at one end and the loss of all such 'feel good elements' at other culminates in the desire of returning home. *Temporary People* portrays the same memory-desire conflict where a man eats a passport and becomes a passport in the chapter titled 'Gulf Return'. Along with the common features of diasporic writing, Deepak Unnikrishnan extends the 'possibilities of language' through illustrations, derogatory expressions, and fragmented narrative. Use of selected vocabularies like *Kadakaran*, *Kada*, *Ivaday*, *Avaday*, *Pravasi*, *Basmati Rice*, and

need make this work a postcolonial narrative, where the use of Chutnified English is politically essential to express the reality in its essence.

The diasporic Indian English literature has its concern upon dislocation, fragmentation, nostalgia for home, marginalization, racial hatred, cultural and gender hatred, conflicts, identity crisis, generation differences, the transformation of subjectivities. Deepak Unnikrishnan with a step forward expressed all these matters in a fragmented narrative style, where the description moves from a short story to a one-act play to a diary entry. Guest workers in UAE as a diasporic community share much problems as the earlier diasporic works expressed. Novels like Kiran Desai's *Inheritance of Loss* (2006), Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* (2003), Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* (1996) have Indian characters living in England and America. They immigrated for better educational and professional opportunities. The condition of eighty percent of the Indians in UAE is different, they were forced to choose exile, in order to feed their families. The temporary condition of such workers as describes by a Taxi man "The city was a board game and labor its pieces, there to make buildings bigger, streets longer, the economy richer. Then to leave. After." (19). The novel documents this kind of vanishing lives, which in terms vanishing history itself. Even in this age of technology and instant communication, as human beings, the place of our birth and the childhood heritage has innate connections with our psyche which determines our life. *Temporary People* as a diasporic narrative documents the scattering and displaced. This is not a work in the form of lament, instead, it marks the temporary lives as scattered narratives still convey the common feeling called *Pravasi*.

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